

The Milestone in the Bridge to Gap the East-West Divide: Salman Rushdie's *East, West: A Study in Characters*

- Dibyajyoti Sarma

Abstract: Despite the fact that he is still considered to be an imperialist, and despite the fact that he himself wrote that East and West can never meet, Rudyard Kipling was perhaps the first intellectual to grapple with the cultural phenomenon of the search for a national identity and the complex realisation what would be known as post-colonial Diaspora. However, it took several decades and another author to give voice to this concern in the modern context – Salman Rushdie and his groundbreaking novel *Midnight's Children*. It was a long time since 1981 till the publication of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999 when Diaspora writing emerged as a genre. This paper argues that in between these landmark achievements, Salman Rushdie's sole collection of nine short stories, *East, West*, makes a perfect meeting point of what happened in the context of the cultural connection between the east and the west, and what was to come, especially in the writings of second generation writers of Indian origin.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Rudyard Kipling, Diaspora writing, Indian Writing in English, East-West Divide, Colonial, Post-colonial writing, second generation writers of Indian origin

Between the First & Second Generations

The theory and practice of the writings of the Indian Diaspora has come a long way since the publication of Salman Rushdie's lone collection of short stories, *East, West* (1994). In an increasingly globalised world, in terms of both economy and culture, especially post 9/11 terror attack in the US, the contexts and the crises of the Diaspora has undergone a sea-change in the recent times. An identity is no longer a cultural binary of either/or. The homeland, imaginary or otherwise, is no longer a definite place. The concept of India is no longer the exotic orient. In this context, *East, West* gives us a comprehensive understanding of how the things have changed in the context of our relationship with the West, both in the context of the Indian Writing in English (IWE) as well as the Diaspora writing, and also the cultural motivations. Rudyard Kipling famously said, "...East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Yet, Kipling was perhaps the first author to try and understand the political and cultural relevance of the two, the dynamics of the Empire and the Colony. In doing so, he created at least two memorable characters who oscillate between two extremes; they conform to neither and yet inhabit both. Mowgli in *Jungle Book* is neither a human (in a cultural sense), nor is he an animal. In *Kim*, the eponymous protagonist

is neither British (again, in cultural sense) nor is he an Indian. If we consider Kipling as the first milestone in understanding the politics of the orient-occident divide and an attempt to bridge it, the next milestone would be the publication of Salman Rushdie's seminal *Midnight's Children* (1981). With *Midnight's Children*, IWE finally found a voice which was new and unique and full of potential. The empire had begun to "write back." Not only the Booker Prize winning novel introduced India to the world in a different light, it also influenced other writers find a voice to tell their tales, and also find a platform to do so. Not only IWE owes its flourishing future to *Midnight's Children*, even the Diaspora writing owes much of its success to this mammoth fictional work. The next pit-stop, so far as the Diaspora writing and the negotiations of the East-West binary is concern, would be Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer award winner *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). With this, IWE was introduced to the whole breed of second-generation Non-Resident Indian writers whose relationship to the orient-occident or the East-West dynamics took a sharp turn.

Whether one supports or not, Kipling was the Queen's Man; he wrote for the Empire. Rushdie and his generation, who were born in India and went to settle down in the West (Britain, the US or Canada), carried with them the baggage of being an "Indian" in a "foreign culture". This baggage, in turn, informed their worldview and their writing. With Lahiri and her generation, the baggage is no longer heavy, and even if it is, it doesn't carry the same concerns. For, these writers are essentially Western. To begin with, their upbringing and education and the culture of their surrounding make sure that they turn out to be westerners. For them, the Indian identity is the identity of their parents, not their own. Therefore, when they question "India" or "Indian", they gaze at it from a "Western Eye", which in turn colour their cultural and identity politics. It is not to say that post-Jhumpa Lahiri generation found it easy and effortless to bridge this divide between the East and the West (or west and east), but the concerns and crises are different than it was with the earlier generation.

In this context, *East, West*, which was published at a midway point between Rushdie's masterpiece and Lahiri's collection of short stories, becomes an interesting document to understand the changing dynamics of the East-West divide. The beauty of *East, West* is that unlike Rushdie's novels, which are ambitious and sprawling, the stories here are laidback, to the point of being non-descript. Unlike the meandering nature of Rushdie's writings in the novels, his stories are straightforward, told plainly and directly. There is no plot invention in these stories, no verbal, linguistic flourish; what these stories contain are the characters, who represent various strata of society and various cultures, and struggle with their pluralistic identities. In short, all the stories in the collection, and the characters who inhabit these stories, deal with the politics of identity.

There is an almost mathematical symmetry in the book. It is divided into three parts: "East," "West" and "East, West," with each part containing three stories. The first part is about characters based in India. 'Good Advice Is Rarer Than Rubies' is about immigration, the allure (or the lack of it) of the West. 'The Free Radio' deals with the issue of government impositions and impossible dreams and meaningless reality. 'The Prophet's Hair' involves a relic that contains Muhammad's hair that was stolen out of the Hazratbal mosque in Kashmir. The West section deals with characters whose origin lies in fiction, history and myth, all Western. 'Yorick' is a fictional account of the childhood of Prince Hamlet and his father's court jester Yorick. 'At The Auction Of The Ruby Slippers' refers to the slippers of Dorothy Gale in the iconic Hollywood film, *The Wizard of Oz*. The title of the story 'Christopher Columbus And Queen Isabella Of Spain Consummate Their Relationship (Santa Fé, AD 1492)' is self-explanatory.

The third section contains stories where Indian characters come face to face with their Western counterparts. In 'The Harmony of the Spheres' an Indian man learns about occult from a British. 'Chekov and Zulu' is about the obsession with western pop-culture, while 'The Courter' is about what it takes to be a local in a foreign country. Reviewing the book in 'The Independent' newspaper (web edition), D J Taylor writes: "East', the opening section, contains three Indian pieces, light in tone but decked out with memorable pathos... The stories in 'West', the second section, are perhaps less successful... But the three stories of the final section – 'East, West' - in which the promised oppositions of the title are finally vouchsafed, are excellent. The collection's highpoint, perhaps, is 'The Courtier', an account of the relationship between an elderly ayah and the stroke-damaged porter of a Kensington mansion block." This, in short, explains the scope of the book.

The People & the Question of *Who They Are...*

Whereas Kipling's characters (Mowgli, Kim) were complete outsiders in the context of the West and whereas Lahiri's characters are outsiders (at various levels) in the context of the East, most characters in *East, West* inhabit an in-between world which is neither here nor there, a really which does not offer an easy choice. In short, all Rushdie characters journeys to find their place in a world which is increasingly pluralistic, and which eludes definition in a concrete structural sense. In a 1995 interview with 'The Paris Review', Rushdie says: "My life has given me this other subject: Worlds in collision. How do you make people see that everyone's story is now a part of everyone else's story? It's one thing to say it, but how can you make a reader feel that is their lived experience?" This is one of the major motivations behind *East, West*: "Everyone's story is now a part of everyone else's story." To illustrate this point, Rushdie's characters inhabit the in-between places, which are dangerous, and which do not provide an easy escape.

Almost all Rushdie characters (barring perhaps the western ones) are flesh and bone, rooted in the religion, culture and politics of the Indian subcontinent (undivided India would be a better word). Be it religion, film and politics, Rushdie's characters behave in a particular way which is ethnically Indian. However, we must add that behind this apparent verisimilitude, Rushdie's characters are the creation of a man who has seen India through the Western Eye. In other words, his characters are outsiders within the perimeter of the socio-political, religious background in which they are placed.

The best example would be Ramani in the story, 'The Free Radio'. He is a young rickshaw puller in a small Indian town who lives accordingly to his whims, whatever childish it may seem to other people, including the narrator, a retired school teacher who is fond of talking to anyone who would listen. So, when he tells us Ramani's story, there are doubts if he's giving us all the facts. After blaming Ramani that he has disgraced himself, the narrator expresses wild hopes of Ramani's redemption by putting the blame of Ramani's downfall on the thief's wife. As the narration ends, we are made to believe that Ramani is the victim of the thief's wife's wiles, which he is trying very hard to reconcile with. But things are not as simple as it seems. The fact remains that Ramani is an outsiders in his own society. He falls in love with the thief's wife, a woman with five children from her previous marriage, willingly submits himself to the government-run family planning programme whether it is for the free radio or not, and sustains an almost childlike gullibility to believe in his dreams. Thus, besides being a well-etched character, Ramani also typifies the trademark quality of a Rushdie character, a loner, an outsider in society. It is interesting to note that all the characters in *East, West* are different from each other, like fire and ice, and each of the characters display a gem-like individuality of their own. Take, for example, the protagonist of the first story, 'Good Advice Is Rarer Than Rubies,' and the last story, 'The Courter'. Miss Rehana is someone who is unwilling to leave her country at any cost. On the other hand, the narrator of the other story would go to any extent to get an UK citizenship.

One important point to observe here is that unlike many other Indian writers, Rushdie's women are not docile and submissive. Forget the women of higher stature, like Auroro Zigoiby of *The Moor's Last Sigh* or Veena Apsara in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, even a small town girl like Miss Rehana displays her sparkling individuality and a great mind of her own. She is beautiful and impressive. What's more, she has the integrity and innocence to handle any situation. When the crook, Muhammad Ali, approaches her, she faces him with her innocence and her sense of determination. For once, Muhammad Ali, the crook, fails to assess his victim. Miss Rehana is not someone with a material dream. She has her feet rooted firmly on the ground, and would do things on her own terms. In that sense, all Rushdie women are determined. They decide their own destiny and walk through it all. His women are not dependent

on their male counterparts. In 'The Free Radio, the thief's wife is a determined woman. With a dead husband and six children to take care of, it's not an easy task for her to survive in the world with the epithet 'thief's wife.' Her marriage to Ramani is an attempt at her survival and unlike the narrator, the readers don't find it hard to identify with her and forgive her. Brought up as a traditional Muslim woman, Huma in 'The Prophet's Hair' is an individual woman. She too is determined and brave. He refuses to wear purdah even when her father threatens to disown her. After the unfortunate event involving her brother Atta, she is determined to go and find a thief herself, in the process, highlighting her integrity and intelligence which her brother certainly lacked.

Queen Isabella of the story 'Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship, strongly reminds us of Aurora Zigoiby. Like Aurora, the Queen is the centre of her power. "She is an absolute monarch. (Her husband is an absolute zero. We will not speak further of him)" (Rushdie, 110). Like Aurora, she is also surrounded by men, none of whom can satisfy her. In the end, it's not Columbus who makes her decide her fate, but her own hunger for power. In this context, one can argue that Rushdie's women represent that perennial place, which his men seek beyond anything else and are denied. The story, 'Harmony of Spheres' sums it up brilliantly, in the context of the relationship between men and women, in the context of the east-west divide, and in the context of a sense of otherness and a sense of belonging.

In the abovementioned story, Khan, the narrator protagonist, is an Indian in England, an academic, a man 'from Arts side', who narrates the story of his friend Eliot Crane, a schizophrenic Englishman obsessed with the occult (which is essentially seen as an oriental phenomenon). Khan is the victim of the East-West tug-of-war which he tries very hard to escape. He loves Lucy, Eliot's wife, but cannot consummate the desire because of the cultural binary, — for, he is the inferior other. This is the same reason he had to break up with his previous girlfriend, a British girl called Laura. Finally, Khan marries Mala, a doctor, a woman 'from science side', who was introduced by Eliot, hoping to find his sense of belonging, 'his rock'. Both Khan and Mala share a sense of historical belonging. But, sadly for Khan, Mala, the nineteenth generation descendent of an Indian labour exported to Mauritius, is the citizen of a different world. In this binary between Khan and Mala, Khan becomes a superior other to Mala's Mauritius background. Thus, Khan dwindles in cultural crises. His cultural identity swings between east and west, unable to settle down anywhere. In a mad desire to locate himself in the cultural chaos and settle down, he becomes Eliot Crane's disciple in the occult science.

Mala opines that Eliot is having a bad influence upon her husband. Khan can't agree more. But he cannot leave Eliot either. Khan confesses: "... In Eliot's... mental storehouse of the variety of 'forbidden knowledge', I

thought I'd found another way to bridge between here-and-there, between my two otherness, my double unbelonging. In that world of magic and power there seemed to exist a kind of fusion of world views ... in which I desperately wanted to believe." (Rushdie, 141) But things are not to be as he plans. As Eliot sinks deep into his occult obsession, running from his own demon, and turning mad, tries to remove himself from this love of 'forbidden knowledge.': "And I know what made him sick. I thought; and vowed in silence to remain well. Since then there has been no intercourse between the spiritual world and mine." (Rushdie: 145) After this unfulfilled tryst with spiritualism, Khan turns to his last remaining shelter, his rock, the world of Mala. However, like all Rushdie heroes, he cannot escape his fate. In an ironic twist in the end, it appears that Mala was having an affair with Eliot, something that he couldn't do with Lucy. In the end, Khan loses both the worlds.

Somehow, Rushdie's women seem to handle this dualism better than Rushdie men. In the story 'The Courter', the ayah, Certainly-Mary chooses India over London, something that the young narrator finds hard to digest. Not only in deciding the unsettling issue of cultural difference and identity, but in every sphere of life, Rushdie women are capable of quick decisions, make choices. While the Rushdie men oscillate between the unsettling issues of self and other, the women are at ease with their own cultural reality. Miss Rehana is firm on her decision to remain in her native land and remain a governess than travel to London to meet her stranger fiancé. The thief window is sure to attract Ramani to ensure her survival. Huma is determined to carry on with her decision to find a thief, not to mention Queen Isabella who tries Columbus's patience at every possible occasion. Both Lucy and Mala decide their own things where their husbands have no roles to play. In 'The Courter', Certainly-Mary is certain about where her heart lies. Even the young girls of the story seem to have their own minds, whereas the adolescent narrator is confused, moving from one incident to another. Rushdie women are rationalists; they are insiders to every cultural situation. To some extent they may be unimaginative; but they make best out of what is given to them.

On the other hand, Rushdie men suffer from this eternal dilemma of decision. The last story of the collection, 'The Courter' sums it all. It tells the story of an Indian boy's adolescent years in upmarket London, his experience of apparently two different cultures of the East and the West, and his family history, and the bitter-sweet love affair between an old Indian ayah Certainly Mary and an one-time grandmaster and now a porter, Mixed-up Mecir. Says the narrator: "I, too, have ropes around my neck. I have them to this day, pulling me this way or that, East or West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose..." (Rushdie: 211) And it is the choices that make all the difference. No studies of Rushdie as a writer is complete without the reference to Rushdie the person (And we are not talking about the fatwa). The sense of exile in Rushdie the person,

his search of imaginary homelands can be traced back to the foundation of all the male characters Rushdie has invented for his fiction. In one sense, all his male characters are part of Rushdie the person: From Salim Sinai to Moraes Zogoiby, from Ramani to the narrator of 'The Courter.' Like Rushdie, all his characters seek the home, a sense of peace, the final destination of arrival. Sadly, this home is nowhere to be found and all his characters end up in tragic circumstances.

At the same time, it is not easy to pinpoint the cultural world of Salman Rushdie. It encompasses the entire world history, the past and the present, from a small town in India with its dusty roads and colourful buses to Spanish history, to Alhambra and tragic fate of Boabdil, to Welsh, to Kensington, and to the site where Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated, as he talks about magic, chess, Rolling Stones, Startrek, the death of Indira Gandhi, and the thieves of Kashmir, all in one breath. And there, somewhere in between lies Salman Rushdie's bridge to gap the East-West divide.

References :

- Rushdie, Salman. *East, West*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1996 .
- Kipling, Rudyard, 1901. *Kim*. New Delhi: Rupa, 1997.
- Kipling, Rudyard, *Jungle Book*. 1894. New York, the Century Company, 1920.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999.
- Taylor, D J, "Fireworks, Rubies and an Ayah." The Independence. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/book-review--fireworks-rubies-and-an-ayah-east-west--salman-rushdie-cape-999-1441648.html>. Last accessed July 1, 2011.>
- Living, Jack, "Salman Rushdie: The Art of Fiction No 186." The Paris Review. No. 174. Summer 2005. <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5531/the-art-of-fiction-no-186-salman-rushdie>> Last accessed July 1, 2011.

